Leather goods stamped with quality

And crafted with pride by West Valley's Simon Aardema

By Bruce Hills
Deseret News staff writer

In a day when more and more manufacturing is accomplished by automated machinery, complicated electronic circuitry and robots, Simon Aardema prides himself on working almost entirely with his hands and with little or no machinery.

Aardema, owner and manager of Simons Custom Leather, West Valley City, has been a leather craftsman for more than 30 years. Today, he has a growing clientele, and his reputation for fine workmanship and quality is spreading throughout Utah and into neighboring states.

One of the few production leatherworkers left in Utah, his line of products includes pistol holsters, belts, rifle scabbards, knife sheaths, saddles, bridles and other horse tack, saddle bags, wallets, purses, brief cases, electricians' and carpenters' tool pouches and belts and many other items.

He also repairs leather goods and can make to order practically anything of leather a customer desires.

"I've been asked to make some unusual things. Once I made a lady a harness to fit her pet skunk so she could take it for walks."

Aardema, born in Holland, came to Salt Lake City with his parents in 1954 at the age of 12. He worked for the J.W. Jenkins Co., leather makers, who used to be at 428 S. State St., for eight years and then opened a shop in his garage next to his home.

Through the years, Aardema has been a full-time truck driver, but has always maintained his leatherworking shop, too. Since the first of this year, when he left truck driving, he has worked full time on his leather business, and his oldest son, Dennis, Magna, has joined him part time.

For several years, Aardema's leather holsters and belts were sold through Sunset Stores throughout Utah and neighboring states. In addition he makes all the holsters for the LAR Manufacturing Inc.'s Grizzly semiautomatic pistol made in Salt Lake City, makes knife sheaths for several custom knife makers and has contracts with several companies to make a variety of industrial leather items — everything from pencil holders to tool pouches.

Since devoting full time to his leather business, Aardema has found himself working 50-hour weeks. "Business is good and getting better all the time," he said.

One of the problems Aardema and other leatherworkers face is the growing cost of high quality leather. Much of the leather available is thin and of low quality and comes from Argentina, England and other countries.

"It is cheaper than American leather, so many leather companies are going to foreign materials, but it shows up in the quality of leatherwork everywhere, too.

"Commercial holsters over the past decade are getting thinner and thinner and workmanship is not nearly as good today as it was 20 years ago. There is a push to get work out and do it quickly and as easily as possible — and with machines instead of hands — to maximize profits.

"I like to make a profit, too, but not at the expense of quality. When I stamp my name on something, I want it right and as good as it can be," he said.

Aardema says he is challenged by the current interest in combat pistol shooting and the need for fast draw holsters for semiautomatic pistols, the growing number of shooters who are putting telescopic sights on revolvers and semiautomatic pistols and new interest in old-style Western holsters worn in the 1800s.

"There is a big resurgence of interest in antique-looking leather goods, including saddles and other horse tack. There were some great looking leather goods in the old days and people are beginning to appreciate that now.

"I'm often asked to duplicate a holster, belt, saddle, bridle, saddle bags or other items from a picture in a book — a picture of something a cowboy had in the 1880s or earlier."

The leather craftsman said he is also challenged by repairing old leather items. "Old saddles can be kept new

and make the holster so it fits that particular gun exactly.

"I feel the leather during every stage of production — the edges, the surfaces, the sewing and any straps that might be put on the holster — to ensure that the finished product will be exactly what I want."

Aardema uses basketweave and other kinds of stamping and dies leather practically any color. In addition, he offers oiled finishes in a variety of shades of brown and red.

In recent years, artificial leather, nylon and other materials have replaced leather in many clothing and sporting goods items. Today, many holsters and gun belts are made of a material called ballistic nylon.

"This is just another challenge to leathermakers. There is really nothing like good quality leather. It will last years and years and adapt to the environment like nothing else.

"I've seen 100-year-old saddles and other leather items much older than that that were still serviceable.

"I would certainly hate to see the use of leather disappear. It has been in use since man began making clothing and tools and remains the best material I know of for holsters, belts, saddles and many other things."

Simon Aardema keeps saddles serviceable but authentic.

'Hot Pursuit' flawed, despite some very funny moments

By Christopher Hicks
Deseret News movie critic

HOT PURSUIT — ★★ — John Cusak, Robert Loggia, Wendy Gazelle, Jerry Stiller; rated PG-13 (violence, profanity, brief partial nudity); Century Complex, Mann Creekside Plaza, Mann 6 Plaza, Plitt Trolley Square, Redwood Drive-In (with "Some Kind of Wonderful").

Paramount Pictures had so little faith in "Hot Pursuit" that the film was not screened for critics anywhere in the country. In fact, critics were barred from attending even the Thursday-night-before-the-Friday-opening radio-promotion screenings.

MOVIE REVIEW

Needless to say, with the red flags waving I expected "Hot Pursuit" to be the turkey of the year. Could this picture really be worse than "Police Academy 4" or "The Allnighter" or "Walk Like a Man," supreme turkeys all? (Even "Hot Pursuit's" TV ad spots looked better than those movies.)

So imagine my surprise when "Hot

young man battling the odds to reach his destination, with those odds ever-mounting. But co-writer/director Steven Lisberger ("Tron") aims low and never raises his sights, and in the end, despite some good, solid laughs, the effort fails.

Loggia also seems to be having a good time, and Wendy Gazelle as the girlfriend is quite appealing, as are Markham and Fabares (where has she been since "The Donna Reed Show"?).

make it for the gun it is to be used with
When I make a holster, for instance, I
"Most of the work you do by feel.
have to count on, not machinery.
mately, it is my hands and eyes that I
machine for three decades and, ulti-
other than an industrial size sewing
"I've worked with few machines
quality.
tion for hand craftsmanship and high
doesn't ever want to lose his reputa-
to expand eventually, but, he says, he
the leather business, and he is hoping
young people an opportunity to learn
crease the size of his shop and give
Aardema says he would like to in-
an art.
matching the new piece with the old is
an antique saddle or bridle and
He often must replace some part of
tic."
keep the old saddle looking authen-
pairs now and again, but it is a trick to